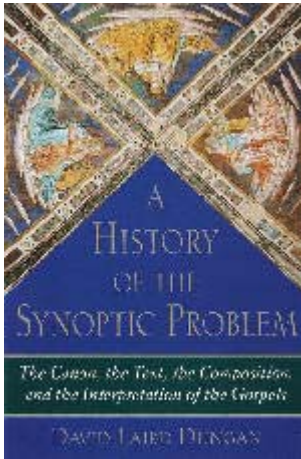


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Dungan, David Laird

A History of the Synoptic Problem: The Canon, the Text, the Composition, and the Interpretation of the Gospels

Anchor Bible Reference Library

New York: Doubleday, 1999. Pp. xiv + 526, Cloth, \$39.95, ISBN 0385471920.

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David Dungan's recent contribution to the Anchor Bible Reference Library, *A History of the Synoptic Problem*, is an excellent intermediate-level survey of the synoptic problem. This recent history is commendable for at least three reasons: (1) it sets the debate in its historic economic, political, and intellectual settings, (2) it comprehensively covers the debate through the past two millennia, and (3) it rationally calls into question common assumptions among the majority of scholars today.

As the title suggests, Dungan describes the history of the debate from the first century to the present. As his is a single-volume treatment, the author must often use broad strokes to sketch the picture of this history. However, with each stroke, Dungan offers a plethora of documentation to support his statements and reconstructions. The result is a very good historiography that offers the student a guide and the scholar a reference to the development of the debate through the centuries.

Dungan lays out the history of the debate according to the way major figures have answered the central question "Where may I find reliable testimony to the Lord Jesus?" In demonstrating the responses to this question, Dungan discusses the development of the debate according to three main periods. The first stretches from the first century until the time of Augustine; the second is from the Italian Renaissance until the end of World War II; and the third includes the decades since WWII.

Part One: The First to the Fifth Century: Conflict and Consolidation

In a very readable, narrative style, Dungan discusses the salient developments and challenges in the early church through the texts of Luke, Papias, Justin Martyr, Tatian, Marcion, and Celsus. Then he illustrates how Origen addressed all four elements of the synoptic problem for the first time (canon, text, composition, and hermeneutics). Here, Dungan goes beyond many treatments of this topic as he demonstrates the need to consider the canonical and textual issues before one addresses the compositional and hermeneutical elements of the problem.

Next, the author illustrates the Christian movement embattled by Porphyry's attacks and gives a plausible interpretation of Eusebius' works (*Preparation for the Gospel*, *Demonstration of the Gospel*, *Ecclesiastical History*, and *Gospel Canons*) as a response to the critic. Further, Tertullian's remarks on the logic of canonization in *The Prescription of Heretics* are used to demonstrate the view that unity equated to veracity.

Dungan closes the first part of the book with a discussion of Augustine's harmonization of the Gospels. In this second form of the synoptic problem, the author recounts Augustine's assumptions and method in resolving the issue. This refutation of the Manichaeans is also seen to close the book on the Porphyrian and Neoplatonic criticisms. Dungan grants that the official suppression of these views may be more the reason for the silence than Augustine's writing; nevertheless, Augustine's treatment stood until the dawning of the Enlightenment.

Part Two: The Creation of the Modern Historical-Critical Method

In the second part of the book, Dungan addresses the cultural, political, economic, and technological elements that contributed to the development of the historical-critical method and the modern understanding and common resolution of the synoptic problem. Beginning with the Italian Renaissance, Dungan demonstrates how the scientific approach to biblical studies developed out of the breakdown of the "medieval synthesis" and resulted in "denaturing the Bible so that it became no more than a handbook of morality any decent person could accept" (148).

In successive chapters, Dungan shows how the Enlightenment and Romantic understandings of nature changed the basis on which reason was based. The purely physical view of the cosmos precipitated the understanding of the universe as a "thing" and the basis of knowledge as empirical data. This scientific way consequently led to the skepticism of Luther's time and his famed attack on indulgences. This appeal to personal conscience as doctrinal arbiter precipitates Descartes' appeal to the pure reason of the individual. Dungan then shows how this appeal to individual reason fed into Hobbes' prioritizing of individual rights over obligations and subsequently into Locke's exposition of human understanding and Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. This economic, political, and cultural egocentrism is then shown to lead up to

the destruction of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945. Dungan then gives a summary of the main features of the modern historical-critical method and how it was manifest among the Reformers.

Having laid the historical basis for the period, Dungan narrates the development of the *textus receptus* and the subsequent chaos after its many errors were discovered. Dungan then departs from the chaos of the time in order to demonstrate the Spinozan roots of the historical-critical method. In this chapter, the author illustrates how this method was conceived by Spinoza purposely to undermine religious authority and to reduce it to a simple moral of loving God and loving one's neighbor. He then shows how Locke's literal hermeneutic reduced Christianity to teachings about the life of Jesus as a moral exemplar. The views of Spinoza and Locke were then imposed upon the canon by John Toland, who pushed for the consideration of all early Christian texts—canonical and apocryphal. Dungan then traces the development of these text-critical issues through the editions of Tischendorf and Westcott-Hort to the early editions by Nestle-Aland.

In the last chapter of part two, Dungan details how the third form of the synoptic problem—the modern form—came into existence and how its preferred solution—Markan priority—was born in the late 19th century *Kulturkampf* of Bismarck's Germany. Dungan amply demonstrates how this third form of the synoptic problem is radically different from the first or the second forms of the problem. It was born out of circumstances that were hostile to the Bible and the traditional Christian system of belief.

Part Three: Current Trends in the Post-Modern Period

In the third part of the book, Dungan critiques the present state of the debate according to the four elements of the synoptic problem. Much of Dungan's critique of the state of the debate is based upon his critique of the historical critical method, discussed in part two. Dungan sees the historical-critical method as developing out of a Spinozan scheme to "eviscerate traditional Christianity and the Bible of their core symbols and values and put in their place a pious moralism ... so that the clergy and the masses would never again ... be able to use the Bible to thwart ... the establishment of a secular nation-state" (347).

Finally, in his discussion on composition, Dungan argues for a re-opening of the synoptic problem. He argues through parts two and three that Markan priority was born of 19th century, German anti-Catholic schemes and was consequently promoted by Bismarck. Therefore, he picks up the thread of W. Farmer and others who argue for Matthean priority. Dungan states that he argues here for a mere reconsideration of the problem; however, much of his discussion is specifically geared toward the establishment of Matthean priority without sufficient consideration of Markan priority. This, too, may result from the limited space that he has to paint his picture.

Perhaps the most significant oversight in this work is that of correlation. While Dungan argues cogently that the Two-Source Hypothesis is born of 19th century anti-Catholic biases, he does not demonstrate that those who still hold to Markan priority are anti-Catholic in their scholarship. The conditions under which an idea is birthed does not necessarily determine the veracity of the argument. On the whole, however, Dungan's history is exceptional in its clarity and holistic description of the debate from the first century through to World War II. I have not encountered another book of its type that covers so much scholarship on the Synoptics as concisely. Further, up to the single chapter on the Neo-Griesbachian school, no substantial bias may be perceived in the narrative but the conclusions are carefully weighed and supported. Dungan's work is top-notch and should be welcomed by all with a receptive mind.